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Practicing Sustainability: Evaluation and Redesign of a Capstone Course Entitled “Integrated Natural Resources Planning”

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This paper presents our progress to-date in evaluating and redesigning a senior-level capstone course for the integrated core curriculum in the College of Natural Resources (CNR) at the University of Idaho. This course, entitled “Integrated Natural Resources Planning,” is now being taught for the 9th semester to all College seniors. The course focuses on: understanding complex issues such as sustainability and ecological integrity; assessing alternatives for management where issues are currently contentious; planning for programmatic implementation; and refining students’ skills in working in teams, critical thinking, writing, and speaking. We first describe the history of the course, and then report some key results of evaluation research to assess its past effectiveness. The purpose of this research has been to further develop and improve upon the course over the last semester. The paper also describes changes currently being made in the course and their perceived effectiveness to-date, which are founded on a teaching approach of a sequential, building process of reviewing and applying resource management topics, skills, and planning exercises. Specifically, course modules consist of (1) a review of planning concepts, socio-economic and biophysical assessment processes, GIS applications, and disciplinary management principles and tools, (2) practice in applying these concepts and tools to real-world case studies, based on in-depth and comprehensive data-bases and management models; and (3) honing students’ presentation skills in reporting the results of these applications. One significant change in the course was that it adopted a service-learning model for its final, capstone project. That project focused on the local landscape in which the UI is located, and it applies planning and assessment processes to provide the local county planning department with maps, data, and recommendations it will use as it begins revising its comprehensive land-use plan. Initial results of evaluation of this course redesign were mixed, but in general a large majority of the students reported that the class was somewhat or very effective in meeting its learning performance objectives. Issues raised by the evaluation results for interdisciplinary, capstone courses in natural resources are discussed.

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